

GunsSmoke and Mirrors: How Sinn Fein Dressed Up Defeat as Victory

by Henry McDonald, Gill & Macmillan, 2008, 256 pp.

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While the 'Northern Ireland model' is increasingly cited as applicable to other conflicts, perhaps especially in the Middle East, the truth about the ending of the Northern Ireland Troubles is misunderstood, not least because a myth has been established by Sinn Fein – 'the polite fiction,' as Henry McDonald puts it, 'that the final outcome had been some sort of honourable draw.'

Why did the Provisional IRA really come to the table?

Henry McDonald is a veteran Ireland correspondent for the Observer and Guardian, with considerable reporting experience in the Middle East too. His slim, commendable, readable but sometimes slapdash book sets the peace process in the context of the complex development of the two IRAs, the Officials and the Provisionals, which split in 1969 over whether to reform or destroy Northern Ireland. The Officials renounced violence and their political wing, the Workers' Party (WP), embarked on a journey on which its most gifted parliamentarians became leaders of the Irish Labour Party. Gangsterism and graft as well as some odd Stalinist connections (such as the North Korean Workers Party) tainted them, but the WP played an important part in weaning members of the British Labour Party and some trade union activists off the primitive anti-partitionist politics that dominated much left thinking in the 1980s.

History could have been very different if the Officials turn to class politics in the 1960s had not been eclipsed in the early 1970s by the more militarist and nationalistic Provisionals, who became 'the most well-armed and sophisticated paramilitary force in the western world,' according to McDonald. The supreme irony, he claims, is that the Provisionals' belief in using spectacular violence to sicken the UK into abandoning Northern Irish Protestants has perhaps permanently deferred Irish unity.

McDonald's central argument is that 'A charade of gunsSmoke and mirrors' has subsequently covered a retreat from their early revolutionary rhetoric as Sinn Fein plays catch-up with the Officials and the middle-class nationalist Social Democratic

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and Labour Party. And if we insist on seeing the Northern Ireland peace process through this gunsmoke we will badly misunderstand it.

This passionate polemic is a scathing indictment of murderous republican illusions. McDonald argues that the Provos spent years sending violent messages to 'the wrong address' – to the UK Establishment rather than the local Protestants, although many of them were murdered. They failed to cajole the UK into being a persuader for unification. Instead, London built solid relations with the Irish government and insisted that Irish unity required consent rather than coercion.

In the 1990s, Republicans gradually dumped the 'ballot box and Armalite' strategy for an unarmed strategy to advance a unitary Ireland through an alliance of UK sympathisers, nationalist Ireland in the 26 counties, and American supporters. However, these hopes too evaporated. The United States became less sympathetic after the 9/11, but the IRA's dalliance with FARC narco-terrorists in Colombia had already infuriated the Bush administration, which rounded on Gerry Adams. McDonald quotes the senior US diplomat Richard Haass telling Adams: 'If any American, service personnel or civilian, is killed in Colombia by the technology the IRA supplied then you can fuck off. Don't tell me you know nothing about what's going on there, we know everything about it.'

Other factors missing from the Republican myth-cum-narrative of the peace process are the heavy infiltration of the IRA by British and Irish agents, the allegedly connected elimination of militaristic elements, and the gradual disintegration of the IRA. So when Martin McGuinness was said to have conveyed the message to the British that 'the conflict is over' and asked for help to come in from the cold, he was acknowledging the end of what McDonald calls 'one of the most futile mini-wars of the last century.' A movement which promised to smash Stormont and never decommission was now ready to reverse both commitments.

McDonald is deeply critical of those British left-wingers who swallowed the Provo narrative. He singles out two groups – the Militant and the ILP (Independent Labour Publications, not Party) as having challenged such thinking. I best declare my own interest as one of those who came to take a deep interest in Northern Ireland as a member of the ILP leadership. I had become active in the Labour Party in 1976 when the demand for 'Troops out of Ireland!' was part of the DNA of much of the left. Some of us came to recognise the fact that parts of the British left were more nationalistic than the Irish left – which sought to halt the violence and

unify the North before any type of new Ireland were possible.

What are the real lessons of the peace process?

The Irish peace process is now often prayed in aid by those seeking to resolve seemingly intractable conflicts, especially in the Middle East. The apparent relevance of Northern Ireland is that there were two sets of people who laid claim to the same 'narrow ground' and whose key representatives sought total victory and couldn't talk to or trust each other. Talking, we are told, is all that matters.

McDonald is unconvinced. He compares the pragmatic Provisionals with theocratic fundamentalists and points out the differences between the IRA's nationalist struggle with Hamas' anti-Semitism and search for a caliphate. And there are other differences. The IRA didn't rain down thousands of rockets on Britain, although its atrocities in the UK were horrendous. Britain's existence wasn't threatened and Britain did not bomb or blockade Belfast to tackle the IRA.

There was always an obvious solution to hand in Northern Ireland and the trick was to stand firm until people accepted that solution. The solution was eventually agreed after years of pointless violence. The endgame was that violence should be ended, that any change in the status of Northern Ireland was pursued through peaceful means, and that Ireland and Britain should enjoy deep and co-operative relations along with power-sharing, full equality and economic change in Northern Ireland. It is for this reason that SDLP Deputy Leader Seamus Mallon said caustically, but accurately, that the Belfast Agreement of 1998 was 'Sunningdale for slow learners' – referring to the (failed) power-sharing agreement of 1973.

Political leaders on all sides came to understand that the solution needed to be embraced. They understood that while beginning with the bigger picture, it was important to take baby steps to achieving it, and, critically, it was important to move at a speed which allowed each side to take their supporters with them. (This re-education of its own base is perhaps what can really be learnt from Sinn Féin, by the way).

For example, Irish republicans had long argued that Britain would hang on to Northern Ireland whatever its people thought. The British Government made it plain that they would only stay there if the majority of people wanted that. This declaration of neutrality – that Britain had 'no selfish strategic or economic interest'

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in Northern Ireland – reassured Republicans who were seeking to transform their movement into a political one. The Irish also took back their constitutional claim to reunification. Unionists talked to Republicans who eventually destroyed their arms.

Sir Jeremy Greenstock and others believe that the dialogue between the British state and the IRA is a model for talks with Hamas. However, in *Talking to Terrorists: Making Peace in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country*, John Bew, Dr. Martyn Frampton, and Inigo Gurruchaga rightly argue that, 'the notion that talking to terrorists is a one-size-fits-all solution to every conflict is too simplistic. It is not always good to talk. Sometimes it can do more harm than good.'

Dialogue took a long time to bear fruit. The dialogue with the IRA began in 1972 when a delegation was flown to London to talk to the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Willie Whitelaw. The IRA was convinced that it was on a roll and regularly proclaimed total victory was imminent in the early 1970s when its violent campaign was at its height. The delegation, which included Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, merely demanded withdrawal and were unwilling to negotiate. Talking to the Provos at that time probably sustained their illusions of military victory, though the secret backchannels undoubtedly played an increasingly positive role in later years.

By the mid 80s, the IRA had, at the very least, been fought to a stalemate, some say defeated. The rise of a stronger political wing was increasingly in conflict with its military wing – the armalite in the one hand and the ballot box in the other strategy contained severe tensions. Talking to the Republican movement, together with laying down conditions concerning the need for exclusively peaceful and democratic politics, was an altogether different notion in these changed circumstances. Even then it took over a decade before the first ceasefire and a few more before the Provisionals took office in a devolved UK institution without the guarantee of Irish unity and decommissioned its weapons.

McDonald's cautions us against what he calls the 'fallacy of the good example.' I would add that no harm can come from the continuation of contacts between those who were prominent in the Irish peace process and a variety of actors in the Middle East who wish to study the process and draw lessons that can be tailored to their own specific circumstances. There has, for instance, already been a stream of visitors between Iraq and Ireland. Such synergies will undoubtedly be increased

in the wake of the appointment of George Mitchell as President Obama's envoy to Israel/Palestine given his previous vital role as the Chair of the talks that led to the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

The main lesson from Northern Ireland is not just the vague idea that the impossible can happen. It is also the very specific lesson that meaningful dialogue occurs only when those involved are brought to see for themselves the futility of armed struggle. Crucial aspects of the Northern Ireland peace process will be missed if we forget that blunt fact, and instead buy into 'the polite fiction that the final outcome had been some sort of honourable draw.'

Gary Kent has written about Irish affairs since the 1980s, and was an organiser of the Peace Train Organisation. He is now Director of Labour Friends of Iraq.

Notes

- [1] The 1985 Labour Party conference in Bournemouth is best remembered for Neil Kinnock's passionate denunciation of the Militant Tendency, but it was also the first year that the Workers Party organised a presence at the conference. Posters announcing that 'craic' would be found at their nightly Irish social nights were plastered across this Dorset seaside resort. This confused many for whom 'craic' was a new term with some other meanings. They organised these events for several years. The evenings combined the flute and guitar with drink and songs of international solidarity and a varied audience came to see that there were left-wingers who loathed the Provos and promoted 'class politics' rather than physical force.